

H-Diplo

H-Diplo Article Reviews

<http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/reviews/>

No. 384

Published on 8 February 2013

H-Diplo Article Review Editors: Thomas Maddux and Diane N. Labrosse

Web and Production Editor: George Fujii

Commissioned for H-Diplo by Thomas Maddux

Jonathan Colman. "Lost Crusader? Chester L. Cooper and the Vietnam War, 1963-68." *Cold War History* 12:3 (August 2012): 429-449. DOI: 10.1080/14682745.2011.573147. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14682745.2011.573147>

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/reviews/PDF/AR384.pdf>

Review by **John Dumbrell**, Durham University

In this excellent article, Jonathan Colman places Chester Cooper in the context of Vietnam War policymaking. Colman sees Cooper – who worked for the Central Intelligence Agency from 1947-63, for the National Security Council staff subsequently, and from 1966 for the State Department – as a war-doubter, attempting to “inhibit the growth of the commitment” to South Vietnam (426). Cooper emerges as a figure recognisable from his widely-read 1970 memoir, *The Lost Crusade*: intelligent, perceptive, though deeply conflicted about the unintended consequences of American internationalist globalism.¹ Colman sees Cooper as “a moderate whose ‘dove’ stance had distinct limits” and as a career intelligence analyst/diplomat who was not prepared to “go public” on his dissent (429-30; 443). I will follow the structure of Colman’s essay, by setting Cooper’s stance on Vietnam against academic debates concerning the murder of President Ngo Dinh Diem and the subsequent escalation of America’s Vietnam commitment, policymaking under President Lyndon Johnson, and peace diplomacy. In all cases, we find Cooper showing considerable degrees both of insight and of indecisive ambivalence

As Colman points out, an important strand within recent Vietnam War scholarly revisionism relates to the role of President Diem. At one extreme, Mark Moyer sees Diem as almost having won the war against communism in South Vietnam in the late 1950s and early 1960s.² Scarcely any writers on the war would now see the murder of Diem, and

¹ Chester Cooper, *The Lost Crusade: The United States in Vietnam* (New York: Dodd Mead, 1970).

² See Mark Moyer, *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954-1965* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

Washington's complicity in it, as anything other than a disaster for the anti-communist cause. The release of tape recordings of John Kennedy's personal reaction to the killing has added poignancy to this debate, with clear indications of Kennedy's mixture of guilt and trepidation in the weeks running up to his own assassination. According to the evidence mustered by Colman, Cooper seems to have understood that American involvement in the coup was a big mistake. Cooper certainly had no illusions about Diem, apparently wishing to see the South Vietnamese leader replaced by someone more congenial to American thinking in 1966. Cooper did, however (like Moyer many years later) see the Strategic Hamlets programme as making significant progress against the Southern insurgency. In this respect, Cooper, despite his severe doubts about Diem, shared in the unrealistic 'wishful thinking' analysis which distorted so much of American policy in Vietnam. Cooper's ambivalence continued into the era of escalation and the Rolling Thunder bombing campaign. As Colman shows, Cooper's characteristic stance was sceptical and appreciative that diplomacy rather than military might would ultimately secure an acceptable outcome for Washington. He shared CIA scepticism about the efficacy of intense air power, clashing with National Security Adviser Walt Rostow in the process. Cooper also had a liking for counter-insurgency and pacification operations in preference to the 'big-unit' war being favoured by General William Westmoreland. His contribution to the intra-administration debates thus adds weight to those historians who argue that alternative strategies – possibly even alternative *winning* strategies – were available to Washington in the mid-1960s.³

Explanations for unrealistic and badly formulated decisions towards Vietnam often thread back to President Lyndon Johnson's own shortcomings: his preference for a 'middle way' between 'peaceniks' like Senator Mike Mansfield on the one hand, and 'bombniks' like Abe Fortas, an old friend of Johnson's (not to mention the Joint Chiefs of Staff) on the other; and also his supposed tendency to become insulated in self-reinforcing elite 'groupthink' in relation to Vietnam. Colman sees Cooper as a lonely doubter on the NSC staff before his move to the State Department. Here Colman arguably downplays the doubts demonstrated by McGeorge Bundy prior to his exit from the White House and even of a degree of ambivalence seen in the advice being proffered by some other national security staffers.⁴ Cooper's role as a NSC 'doubter' may in fact have encouraged Johnson in his self-image as a realistic plotter of a rational 'middle way' between extremes of opinion even within his own White House. Such a self-image again certainly distorted policy and undercut much possibility of Johnson providing effective leadership. Cooper seems to have accepted a 'groupthink' analysis of Johnson's Vietnam decision-making. Colman tells us that Cooper saw the Tuesday Lunch group, the main

³ See John Dumbrell, *Rethinking the Vietnam War* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp. 44-9; 160-90.

⁴ See Andrew Preston, *The War Council: McGeorge Bundy, the NSC, and Vietnam* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2006); Gordon M. Goldstein, *Lessons in Disaster: McGeorge Bundy and the Path to War in Vietnam* (New York: Times Books, 2008).

Vietnam policymaking forum under Johnson, as a cabal and was sensibly critical of Johnson's failure to take due account of CIA analyses of the situation on the ground in Vietnam (437). Military analysis was consistently inferior in quality to that provided by the CIA (and even by Thomas Hughes' small intelligence unit at the State Department), so here Cooper did have a point. Cooper's understanding of the role of the Tuesday Lunch group is perhaps not quite so persuasive in retrospect. Scholarship on this subject has tended to demonstrate the degree to which LBJ actually did almost constantly reach out across his administration and beyond in search of advice on the war.⁵ Perhaps we can conclude that Cooper's understanding of the Tuesday Lunch group was to some degree distorted by his personal dislike of Walt Rostow.

Chester Cooper's involvement with peace negotiations must be central to any evaluation of his role in Vietnam policy, and Colman provides us with an excellent (if necessarily brief) account of it. Again, Cooper's outlook was tinged with ambivalence. Cooper was aware of the extent to which Johnson saw U.S. involvement in peace diplomacy as largely directed to assuage international criticism rather than actually to secure a settlement in Vietnam. Johnson memorably described diplomatic initiatives as "the old college try" – attempts to demonstrate good faith rather than realistic efforts to achieve a substantive breakthrough.⁶ The gulf between Hanoi and Washington, as Colman indicates, really was very wide. No formula for 'jumping together' – that is, for each side to take reciprocal action to de-escalate in conditions of at least a degree of mutual trust – was ever effectuated. Cooper indeed was personally involved in several efforts to establish such a formula (though arguably Colman overstates Cooper's and understates Robert McNamara's role in influencing Johnson's San Antonio formula' speech of September 1967[440]). Cooper was intimately involved in the 'Phase A/Phase B' mutual de-escalation negotiations in London in February 1967 between Prime Minister Harold Wilson and Soviet leader Aleksei Kosygin. Colman seems to accept that Cooper himself was not party to the full ramifications of Johnson's peace feelers towards Hanoi, thus exculpating Cooper from the charge that he misled the British. Central to these discussions is the issue of the extent to which the road to peace in Vietnam could plausibly be seen to run through Moscow. Johnson seems to have entertained, at least in his less cynical moments, unrealistic hopes for effective Russian mediation. I wonder if the extant record gives any more indication of the extent to which Cooper genuinely saw Russian mediation in Vietnam as a feasible prospect.

⁵ See David Barrett, *Uncertain Warriors: Lyndon Johnson and His Vietnam War Advisors* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1993); Kevin B. Mulcahy, 'Rethinking Groupthink: Walt Rostow and the National Security Advisory Process in the Johnson Administration', *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 25: 2, pp. 237-50.

⁶ Robert Dallek, 'Lyndon Johnson and Vietnam: The Making of a Tragedy', *Diplomatic History*, 20:3 (1996), pp. 147-62, 153.

Jonathan Colman does an excellent job of retrieving the story of Chester Cooper and Vietnam: the story of a how one of the 'best and brightest' attempted to reconcile conflicting understandings of America's role as container-in-chief of world communism.

John Dumbrell is Professor of Government at Durham University (UK)

Copyright © 2013 H-Net: Humanities and Social Sciences Online.

H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for non-profit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author(s), web location, date of publication, H-Diplo, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For other uses, contact the H-Diplo editorial staff at h-diplo@h-net.msu.edu.